JESSICA ROSE
JUL 31, 2024

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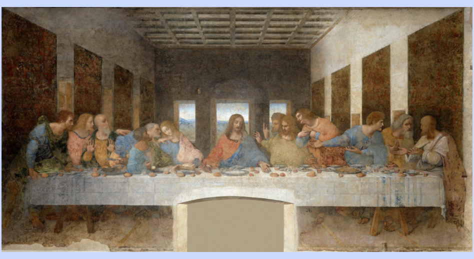
I saw an intriguing thread analyzing The Last Supper on Twitter today and it compelled me to look at it more closely for the first time in my life. I am intrigued by the math and the numbers and the symmetry and the symbolism and the sheer beauty of this work.

It’s in a monastery in Milan, Italy, and was painted c. 1495–1498. Leonardo da Vinci is probably one of the most interesting people of all time to me. He lived from April 15, 1452 – May 2, 1519, and was something of a genius in any and all fields. He was truly a person who just **could do**. He was not constrained by any kind of self-doubt, even if he himself, may have thought he was, from time to time. He was an observer, and a gentle spirit who loved animals. A man after the heart of any lover of life; he was said to be a releaser of birds from cages. Why should a bird ever be in a cage, after all?

To this day, no one claims to know where his remains are. Someone knows.

Here is this most beautiful work.



The painting is said to portray the reaction of Jesus’ Apostles when Jesus told them that one of them would betray him. The Apostles shown in threes - except for Jesus - are as follows from left to right: Bartholomew, James, Andrew; Judas Iscariot, Peter, John; Jesus; Thomas, James the Greater, Philip; Matthew, Jude Thaddeus, Simon the Zealot.

Without having studied this painting before, I decided to look at it with my eyes and see what I see. Here are my observations:

1. There are 12 Apostles that represent the 12 tribes of Israel. The number 12 is apparently also important in biblical numerology representing completeness, perfection, and unity.
    a. 12 is divisible by 3 and 4, and 2 and 6, and 1 and itself. Really divisible! I think maybe the reason why Leonardo chose to paint the guys in 4 groups of 3 is because 3 is a big deal in terms of the Trinity itself: God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ), and God the Holy Spirit. Triptych’s are painted in 3s. So much could be unpacked here, but not now. Safe to say, Leonardo very, very, very intentionally chose to paint the Apostles in 4 groups of 3.
2. The 12 Apostles are depicted in groups of 3 even though Jesus just told them that ONE of them would betray him. That’s interesting, no? I mean, if I’m sitting at the dinner table with 12 of my besties and the leader of our pack said that one of us was going to betray him then I would spit out my wine and bread and look directly at him and say “Whaaaaaaaat”? If I was the one who was going to betray him, and I had some kind of plan, I might look away or around, or at him in shock that he knew. Leonardo thought about all of that and ‘knew the natures of his subjects’ and so he chose very deliberately not to paint their individual reactions, but their reactions as small groups of 3. He probably chose to do this to demonstrate some of the inherent natures of man himself. Things like: sociality, desire to discuss/debate/defend/create groups, and even their own holiness.
3. Jesus is sitting on his own, represented himself as a 3 (very triangular) in the exact centre of the painting.
4. There is real light behind only Jesus and Thomas, and a little behind James the Greater. The rest have dark panels behind them.
5. Simon the Zealot is the only one with a really dark background, more like a silhouette.
6. The only person who absolutely seems unmoved by Jesus’ declaration that one of them would betray him is John, or Mary Magdalene, depending on who you think Leonardo painted there, despite the fact that Peter not only has his face all up in her face, but his hand in quite an intimate place on her neck. This might be perceived as a persuasive gesture, or maybe he was going for the necklace? For example, if we were to imagine what Leonardo was thinking that Peter was saying to John/Mary in that moment, maybe it would be something like: “Well, you must believe that it was **one** of us.” Perhaps she was calm and confident that none of them would ever betray Jesus.
7. A lot of the Apostles talk with their hands.
8. We don’t actually know how long after Jesus tells them that one of them is going to betray him that these reactions are meant to represent. It probably isn’t a few seconds after because I think Leonardo might have painted the Apostles singular reactions in that case. So I think that some time had passed in the ‘painting reality’, and we are being shown the real nitty gritty of the human reactions to what must have been a very jarring thing to hear to this group of loyal followers.
9. There are 8 visible bare feet.
10. Three people are visibly standing (Bartholomew, Thomas and Philip).
11. The only person whose head is turned completely away from Jesus is Matthew.
12. Andrew’s hands are the only ones in a completely defensive or protective position.
13. Judas Iscariot is the only one sitting down and completely in the foreground of two others.
14. There seem to be two main conversations being had on either side of Jesus: both that seem to be focused on trying to prove loyalty.

This painting took 4 years to paint but we perceive it much like a photograph. Imagine how many things Leonardo went though in those 4 years. He didn’t work on this painting continuously, so it’s possible and even likely that he even changed his idea for the end point of this painting as time went on.

Here’s what I think each Apostle and Jesus was thinking/saying at the ‘time’ that the painting was ‘taken’, and how Leonardo meant to characterize them. I make no claims as to the truth, because, well, no one could!

1. Bartholomew: A listener/observer who cares about what’s right. His body language is strong but not aggressive.
    a. “If I listen, I will hear the truth.”
2. James: A listener/observer who cares for his friends.
    a. “If I listen, I will hear the truth. But I just want to persuade Peter a wee bit with this gentle gesture and I want to assure Andrew a bit because he’s getting defensive.”
3. Andrew: An observer, but a defensive one. His hands are overtly outward and in front.
    a. “If I listen, I will hear the truth. But I have to make sure no one thinks I am not loyal. It isn’t me.”
4. Judas Iscariot: A non-imposing, ‘non-reactive’ person, but tightly gripping in his right hand what might be something of value. His body is open and turned to John/Mary, and grasping for something with his left hand. He is *enveloped* by Peter and John/Mary, and Peter seems to have a knife out in his right hand behind the back of Judas.
    a. “I don’t know what’s going on here.”
5. Peter: A really engaging positioning here, Leonardo. He’s got James’ hand on his back but he doesn’t notice, a hand on John/Mary’s neck, and his body is fully extended toward John/Mary as if to engage her and even convince her of something. He also has a casual knife in his right hand that is very clearly painted in. Maybe he’s whispering to John/Mary that the little guy in front is the betrayer?
    a. [In a Homer whispering voice] “You gotta believe me. It’s him. I saw him clenching something, something…” Meanwhile, Judas clenches.
6. John/Mary: A lovely most serene and engaging facial expression and body positioning. She’s very clearly leaning to her right to hear what Peter is saying. She’s not bothered by it, or by the hand on her neck. Her eye point seems to be very focused in a way so as to deflect negativity. Her fingers are gently laced and placed sweetly in front of her on the table in full display, even though two others’ hands - one of those hands is Jesus’ hand - are very clearly grasping/reaching in very close proximity to hers.
    a. “I think you need to let things be as they are. Somehow, things are always ok.”
7. Jesus: A look of dismay on his face with his left hand upturned, and his right hand downturned. Balance the halves. He is a very imposing, yet serene figure position-wise in this painting. He is direct centre and has a half-and-half outfit thing going on. His head is turned slightly to the left as if to be giving more ‘calm down’ attention to the folks to his left - almost as if he knows John/Mary got the folks on the right handled.
    a. “I don’t know guys. what can I say, it’s what God told me was gonna happen.”
8. Thomas: The one finger in the air is a standout. He is standing completely obscured by James (who looks pissed) as well.
    a. “Name *one* time I betrayed you!”
9. James the Greater: He looks pissed. His facial expression suggests that he is appalled at the mere suggestion of betrayal. Arms outstretched, hands open, nothing to hide. His arms are very nondescript too - they kind of just blend into his torso and robe.

a. "I would *never* betray you!"

10. Philip: More of a sooky looky here. Hands pointing inward indicative of a possibility of examination of self guilt but ultimately rejecting it, in pain, at the mere suggestion of betrayal.
    a. "I *could* never betray you."
11. Matthew: Body language says it all. He's turned completely away and is appearing to try to convince his guys on the end there that it was one of the guys on the other end of the table. He doesn't seem to hold back on this with both arms and hands pointing in the direction of the subject matter.
    a. "Come on! Look at him! It's him!"
12. Jude Thaddeus: He has one hand turned in and one on the table open, and seems to be a good listener and trying to figure out for himself who the betrayer could be.
    a. "But he never did anything to suggest he would betray Jesus. How do you know?"
13. Simon the Zealot: He seems convinced as well that it was one of the guys at the other end of the table, and he is appearing to try to convince Jude of someone's guilt. His hands are outstretched and offering - not defensive - and his body language is relaxed. It is interesting, however, how Leonardo painted him in silhouette and quite bald.
    a. "It's him."

I hope everyone reading this understands that I am not trying to make any claims or offend anyone by simulating what the subject members of The Last Supper were thinking. I just thought it was a really fun thing to do. I love painting. I love art. I love Leonardo. And I find the story of Jesus fascinating.

If I was to say though, I would guess that Leonardo was quite successful in depicting a number of very real human reactions to being accused of betrayal by someone who they loved. It was Judas Iscariot, by the way.

This is just a superficial perspective though. I am absolutely sure there are dozens more Easter eggs in this painting. I didn't even get into the geometry of this painting. Maybe next time. Hope you found it fun!

What a Maestro Leonardo da Vinci was.

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Dave Jul 31 ♥ Liked by Jessica Rose

Jessica, you have a truly scientific mind. You observe carefully, simplify, speculate, theorize.

Then you have a gift for explaining in inviting, humorous and simple language.

Please don't change... stay unacceptable. 😁

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1 reply by Jessica Rose

Swabbie Robbie Jul 31·*edited Jul 31* ♥ Liked by Jessica Rose

Well done. Art history classes I had never looked at the subject matter as you just did. They would comment on composition, colors, brush strokes, and dynamics of the layout. But I never heard any speculate on what the individuals were thinking or saying. Great art like great music allows us to interpret meaning in terms of our experiences and the emotions the images or songs (words and melodies) brings out in us.

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This is one of the emails I received the other day. I get hundreds daily, and I am hearing you all.

This particular note spoke loudly to me and this lovely person gave me permission to share her words.

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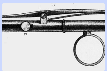

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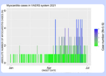

Donald Trump is the reason I left Facebook after more than 10 years

And I want to say thank you.

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